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SAINT MARK'S CHOIR

Philadelphia, Pa.

Sermon on the Fiftieth Anniversary

DELIVERED IN THE PARISH CHURCH

BY THE RECTOR

REV. ELLIOT WHITE

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WE keep to-day the Jubilee, or Fiftieth Anniversary of Saint Mark's Choir, the first in Philadelphia to wear the chorister's vestments.

When God of old entered into covenant with His chosen people Israel, He not only gave them the moral law, but established for them an elaborate worship. The service, first of the tabernacle, and then of the temple, was costly and magnificent, as befitted the glory and majesty of the Lord of Hosts. God would be worshipped "in the *beauty* of holiness"; therefore the fine arts of architecture, sculpture, poetry and music were called to religion's aid. Sculpture only a little, since it might easily lead to idolatry, the bane of the Jews. Music with the utmost freedom, since, while kindling the emotions, it recalled no visible shape, but furnished fitting clothing for the inspired words of religious poetry. The music of the sanctuary reached its highest excellence under the old dispensation in the days of David and Solomon, Israel's greatest kings. We think of David as the most gifted of the Hebrew poets; he was also one of the most distinguished musicians of his day. He composed his psalms to be set to music, and himself chose some of the tunes. These, as is the case with our hymn tunes to-day, often bore singular names such as "The Hind of the

Morning" or "The Dove in the Distant Trees." The Book of Psalms is full of musical annotations. This psalm is to be accompanied with wind, and that with stringed instruments; at this point there is to be an interlude; this measure is to be taken by the soprano alone. Solomon followed worthily in the footsteps of his father David, devoting himself more especially to the perfecting of the choir and of instrumental music. Four thousand Levites were set apart to praise the Lord with the instruments his father David had made. Two hundred and eighty-eight were instructed in the art of singing; and, for the more convenient rendering of the daily service, divided into twenty-four courses or choirs of twelve each. In the First Book of the Chronicles, which is so seldom studied, the names of some of the old choirmasters appear. They were famous men in their day. Everybody had heard of Asaph, Heman, Ethan and Jeduthun. And in several instances complete choir rolls remain. The book Ecclesiasticus gives a glowing description of the Temple music at another period. I dare say their music would not appeal much to us, for it was very primitive. The ancients knew nothing of time; it is doubtful if they appreciated harmony; and the melodies crept for the most part, note by note up and down the scale, seldom venturing on thirds, fifths or longer intervals. But it was the best music they knew, and God accepted it as their best. And it inspired those who sang and those who heard them, completely satisfying their simple tastes.

For us Christians music has the honor to be associated with both the Advent and the Exodus of the world's Redeemer. At His birth the angels sang "Glory to God in the Highest, and on Earth, Peace, Goodwill Toward Men." So of His going forth to suffer and die, it is written: "When

they had sung an hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives." Our Lord, as a frequenter of the Temple, must often have heard its choirs, and not unlikely have joined in the sacred chorus. The early Christians, being of Jewish origin, continued for a considerable time to attend the Temple, adding afterwards the distinctively Christian service of "breaking bread from house to house," and this service may have been musical, for we find in the Fourth of Acts a Christian hymn. Saints Paul and Silas, shut up in the Phillipian prison, sang praises to God at midnight, and the doors were opened and the prisoners loosed. And Saint Paul writes to the Colossians and the converts of the neighboring cities, where also his epistle was to be read: "Let the word of God dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Almost the same words occur in his epistle to the Ephesians.

The earliest outside account of the Christians come to us from the Roman Governor, Pliny. He describes them as a people who sang hymns to the praise of Christ. Plainly their service was musical. The first effort to systematize the music of the church was made by Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, in the latter part of the Fourth Century. He adapted the Greek "Modes" or scales to the use of the Church. Saint Augustine, his spiritual son, relates in His *Confessions* that he was moved to tears by the beauty of some of the hymns composed to sustain the Christians who were at that time being persecuted by the Arian Empress, Justina. Elsewhere in his *Confessions* Saint Augustine tells us how sacred music may become a snare, when people, forgetful of the meaning of the words,

give themselves over to the criticising or admiring of the sounds. About two hundred years later, Pope Gregory the Great reformed and improved the music of the Church. Schools were founded at Rome for choir training; the old tunes were stripped of the frivolous and secular embellishments that had been gradually added, and the Gregorian chant set forth. This plain song music continues to this day in our Communion, the melodies having been adapted to the English language largely through the labors of Merbecke, in the days of Queen Elizabeth.

The Reformation period was marked by much activity and advance in Church music. Calvin and Luther made much of congregational singing, and of the latter Cardinal Cajetan complained bitterly, "He hath conquered us by his songs." Church music had for several centuries been in need of extensive and radical reformation. It was the old story of trifling tunes and performers stealing the popular heart. Saint Thomas Aquinas, "The Angelic Doctor," who lived in the Thirteenth Century, disapproves of the clergy singing at all, and condemns instrumental music in Church as savoring of mere pleasure. The Council of Trent dealt severely with the whole subject, and it looked at one time as if music would be forbidden in the Church altogether. The great musician Palestrina, arose in this critical time. and by his "Mass of Pope Marcellus," composed to show what Church music could be made, saved the day for the musical art.

Modern music owes much to the inspiration of religion, to which in turn it has proved a faithful handmaid. The names of Bach, Handel, Hayden, Mendelssohn and Gounod will at once occur to you, men whose masterpieces will inspire to devotion while time shall last.

The sad decline of religion everywhere during the Eighteenth Century was accompanied by a corresponding declension in all that rendered the worship of God beautiful. Taste was at low ebb, in some places it seems almost to have disappeared.

It is first to the Evangelical revival of the Wesleys, and then to the Oxford movement of Pusey, Keble and Neale, that we owe under God, the recovery of our ancient heritage of beautiful worship. The improvement had to make its way in the face of intensest prejudice and unreasoning fear of Rome. It is difficult for the present generation to understand the furious indignation and storms of abuse that greeted the reintroduction of altars, lights, vestments, incense, and among other things, the dignifying of the office of chorister, by the distinctive garb of cassock and cotta.

It must have taken considerable courage for the people of Saint Mark's to introduce a vested choir in Philadelphia, fifty years ago. Vested choirs were never discontinued in the cathedrals of England, but Saint Mark's was among the first to appear in this country. The better to insure success, the Vestry engaged as choir trainer and leader Mr. James Pearce, who is with us to-day. Mr. Pearce came to us from Quebec, but he received his musical education in England, where he was accorded the degree of Bachelor of Music by the University of Oxford. Boys and men were gathered and trained by him, and after about six months' feverish expectation the choir made its first appearance in vestments, Easter Day, April twenty-first, 1867. Many heads, doubtless, were shaken and the gloomy question asked: "What are we coming to?" if not at St. Mark's yet elsewhere in the city; but the improvement was too manifest to succumb to prejudice. It is also our pleasure

to have with us this morning these surviving members of the original choir. And I doubt not, if they contrast the opposition of fifty years ago with the present popularity, I had almost said universality, of boy choirs, they will say with thankfulness: "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes."

I have learned from inquiry and search among the records some facts of interest in our choir history of fifty years. Our organists and choirmasters have been as follows:

James Pearce, Bachelor of Music of Oxford University, 1866-73.

Austin Pearce, his brother, 1873-4.

J. Kendrick Pyne and Mr. Welmore, 1875.

Frederick W. Mills, Fellow of the College of Organists of Great Britain and Examiner of the Royal College of Music, September 1876, to February, 1881. Mr. Mills is in this city, but is not here to-day, being confined to the Hospital. I hope some of his former pupils will take this occasion to visit him.

Dr. Cutler, March to November, 1881.

Minton Pyne, formerly of St. Augustine's Pendlebury and Assistant Organist of the Cathedral, Manchester, England, November 1, 1881, till his death, April, 1905. Mr. Pyne, by his talents, diligence and sweetness of disposition, endeared himself not only to this Parish but to Philadelphia Church people generally. To-day is the twelfth anniversary of his funeral, and I ask you to remember him at the altar in your prayers.

F. Averay Jones, 1905-1914, when he enlisted in the British army and is now fighting for his country "somewhere in France."

Mr. Lewis A. Wadlow, our present organist and choirmaster, came to us November 1st, 1915.

I have obtained the names of 523 persons who have been or are now connected with Saint Mark's choir. There are, however, large gaps in the records and I have reason to think that a complete list would include considerably over six hundred names.

I regard it as something of which St. Mark's choir may be proud that ten choristers have left its ranks for the closer service of God in the sanctuary, as priests before His altar. These are:

Rev. Archibald Balsley and Rev. Arthur W. Hess, now deceased.

Rev. Charles Mercer Hall, Rector of St. Mary's, Asheville, N. C.

Rev. Charles L. Miel, Rector of St. Peter's, San Francisco, Cal.

Rev. Ernest de F. Miel, D. D., Hartford, Conn.

Rev. Joseph Sherlock, Rector of St. Chrysostom's, Philadelphia.

Rev. Francis H. Smith, Rector of All Saints', Fallsington, Pa.

Rev. Charles L. Steeel, Rector of Calvary Church, West Philadelphia.

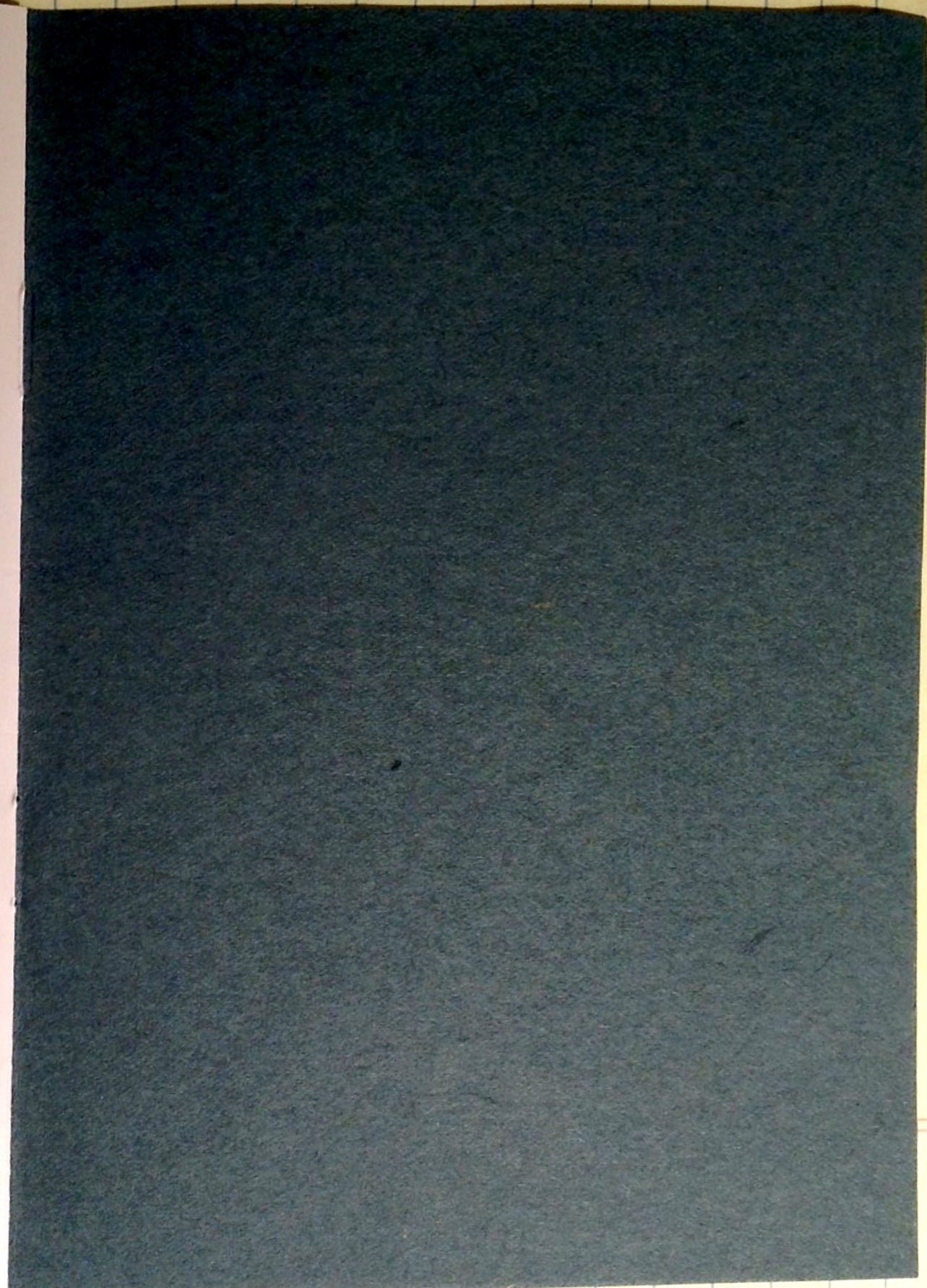
Rev. Robert Williams, Assistant, Trinity Church, Princeton, N. J.

Rev. Frank Williamson, Jr., Associate Mission, Newtown, Pa.

In looking over the records of twenty-five years ago, I find that the boys were provided with supper on Sunday evenings. But it is to be noted also that they were required to sing every day of the week at Evensong, for nine months of the year.

In 1881 an ambitious plan was formed to establish an orphanage for destitute boys, which should also be a choir school. In the light of the experience of other churches with similar projects we may be glad that the plan fell through. It would have been far beyond our means, and in some ways undesirable. All orphans are not gifted with musical voices.

In connection with St. Mark's choir, the Men's Choral Society was organized in 1890. The Rector was President, Mr. Andrew Wheeler, Organist, and Mr. C. A. Lammott, Secretary. This choir rendered on various occasions Tobias Hasslinger's Mass in C, Gounod's Second Mass of the Orpheonists, Volkman's Mass in A flat, Wilhelm Tschirch's Mass, Cherubini's Requiem, and several selections from Schubert. A number of hymns, with music rewritten for men's voices exclusively, were also brought out by them. In 1896 the Choral Society was discontinued as a choir, and became the nucleus of the present Fortnightly Club of Philadelphia.

In the years 1899 and 1900 the Junior choristers organized a Cadet Corps of twenty boys. I found the guns of this organization some time ago in an attic at St. Michael's Chapel.

In conclusion I would ask you all, congregation and choir, to perpetuate the best traditions of our past. "Singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord," let that be your motto. Sacred music without this grace, sung for self to gain the applause of men, is, as Saint Augustine has showed us, not a help but a hindrance. But when self is forgotten in the overpowering desire to set forth God's praise, then indeed the singer's efforts are acceptable to Him and reach the perfection of their art.